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RUEHLC/AMEMBASSY LIBREVILLE 0250
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SUBJECT: FORMER PRESIDENT RETURNS TO THE CAR SPARKING WIDE MEDIA
ATTENTION BUT DOES NOT SHIFT THE POLITICAL SPECTRUM

REF: A) BANGUI 68, B) BANGUI 209 AND PREVIOUS

1. (SBU) SUMMARY: On October 30, 2009, former Central African (CAR) President Ange Felix Patasse returned to the country after an eight year exile in Togo. It is still unclear how his return affects the elections of 2010, for which he has affirmed he will run (Ref A), but it has clearly shaken his former party and opened old wounds from his time as President. Post suspects that President Francois Bozize, who has tacitly encouraged the return, sees the ``National Beard'' as a wedge in the already fractured opposition. And while Patasse retains some support, especially among his ethnic kinsmen in the populous and rebellious Northwest, his anarchic reign as president stands in marked contrast to the relative calm that Bozize has brought to Bangui and its environs. As a result, Post believes that Patasse's return will contribute to solidifying Bozize's position prior to the elections and, despite the former president's bravado, will not significantly alter the national political picture of the CAR. END SUMMARY.

2. (SBU) Patasse's return, his second since a 2003 coup d'etat forced him from office, garnered much media attention and sparks anew the controversy that surrounds his presidency of the CAR. To his supporters, he remains a highly charismatic leader who harkens back to the days of Emperor Bokassa - for whom he was Prime Minister - and for his symbolic status as the first Central African President to be democratically elected. To his detractors, he is a war criminal who invited Libyan soldiers and then Congolese mercenaries to the country, sparking off a period of chaos, murder, and rape in Bangui and the interior as he attempted to hold on to power during various mutinies and coups. Many think he should follow Jean Pierre Bemba before the International Criminal Court.

3. (SBU) Patasse's homecoming from his Togolese exile is seen by many as Bozize's attempt to destabilize the opposition Movement for the Liberation of Central African People (MLPC) before the elections. The most well established and organized opposition

party, the MLCP and its candidate, Martin Ziguele (Ref B), stand as the most credible threat to Bozize's reelection bid. Ziguele, who was Patasse's Prime Minister, privately lobbied Patasse not to return and has publically condemned his attempt to reclaim leadership of the party. Though the MLCP's members have stayed loyal, with the exception of a few defections from around Patasse's home town of Paoua, Ziguele is clearly feeling some pressure. According to the local press, the MLCP recently sent a delegation to Patasse seeking a compromise. To date, there is no evidence that one has been reached. In the end, both men have very healthy egos and a significant amount of mutual bad blood over Ziguele's denunciations of the former President during the 2005 elections and proceeding years. It therefore seems unlikely that a reconciliation will be reached and Patasse will most probably run as an independent candidate.

¶4. (SBU) Logically, the arrival of Patasse is a boon for Bozize: the distraction it brings to the MLCP is significant and the back and forth between Ziguele and Patasse reaffirms to the public that Ziguele is intimately linked to the upheavals of the former president's rule. But Patasse could pose problems for President Bozize as well, due to his popularity in the northwest and his legendary ability to incite crowds through bursts of populist rhetoric. Thus, there are apparently two divergent camps on how to deal with Patasse among Bozize's closest advisors:

-- Those who believe that Patasse cannot be trusted and that everything should be done to destabilize him.

-- Those who see him as a relative - Patasse and Bozize are related by marriage - who should be nurtured as a thorn in the side Ziguele.

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The face to face meeting between Patasse and Bozize on November 9 suggests the later group is winning out. The meeting was apparently cordial and striking in that Patasse was so deferential to Bozize.

¶5. (SBU) COMMENT: Public opinion is very difficult to gauge in the CAR as reliable polling is nonexistent, but discussions by officers at Post with people across a broad spectrum of Central African society all come to the same basic conclusion that Patasse is not the same force he was previously and that his time has passed. The French Ambassador reminded the Ambassador in a recent conversation that whatever one might begrudge Bozize, his eight years in power have brought relative stability to a city - Bangui makes up nearly a quarter of the country's population - shaken by Patasse's excesses and unhinged attempts to maintain power.

¶6. (SBU) It is entirely possible that Patasse knows he cannot beat Ziguele and Bozize, but hopes his run for the presidency will give him enough credibility that he can reclaim the fortune he lost during the coup of 2003 or demand a ministerial position from whomever is in the best position for the second round of the elections. Regardless of whether his run is for political position, financial gain, or simple pride, Patasse should not be viewed as Bozize's principal challenger and Bozize remains the most likely victor in the upcoming elections. END COMMENT.
COOK